

To the Environment Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly:

The National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut and Connecticut Association of Blind Students oppose Section 6 of Senate Bill 1061, and we respectfully request that it be removed from the bill.

Section 6 of this bill, if passed, will take away employment opportunities from blind people that were created back in the 1940s, through the Randolph-Sheppard vending program. Section 6 will remove opportunities for blind people to operate vending stations at Department of Energy and Environmental Protection facilities. We currently know of three blind people who will lose their jobs if section 6 is implemented. They work at Gillette Castle, Rocky Neck, and Hammonasset State Parks. Multiple generations of blind entrepreneurs have fed their families by managing vending stations at these state parks, and we need this program to continue.

While the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind and Department of Rehabilitation Services oversee these facilities, it is the blind vendors that work hard on a daily basis, in order to provide a valuable service to the public. The National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut strongly believe that blind people deserve to work. These blind vendors are tax paying members of society, and the state of Connecticut will lose tax funds that they would have had, if their facilities were not removed from their care. Connecticut would also bare the cost of having to rehabilitate these newly unemployed vendors, at substantial cost to tax paying citizens. Connecticut would not benefit from simply handing BESB a check on their behalf for 10% of the profits. The purpose of BESB is not to raise funds; it is to empower blind people to live meaningful and productive lives. Section 6 contradicts this purpose.

Blind people and other workers with disabilities are specifically excluded from the minimum wage, and it is legal to pay a blind employee a penny per hour right here in Connecticut in 2015. There are many employers across the state that do exploit workers with disabilities in this way, but these vending program opportunities allow us an opportunity to earn a living wage. We go to school to become productive workers but need the opportunities to be productive.

Blind people face many misperceptions and low expectations in our quest for employment. We know, with the right training and opportunity, blind people can lead meaningful and productive lives. We can live without welfare programs if we have opportunities like the one created by the Randolph-Sheppard Vending Stand Act. Please do not reduce the opportunities that blind people have to earn a living and support our families. Please do not allow Section 6 to take away these opportunities and push blind entrepreneurs back toward social welfare programs. We, the blind, want to be hardworking citizens and taxpayers. In many cases, we are, and we request that you let us continue to contribute to the State of Connecticut in a meaningful way.

We stand ready to be a partner and resource to everyone in our state, especially with, but not limited to, all matters regarding blindness.

Sincerely,

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